



LIFE IN THE COMPANY TOWN

These activities introduce students to life in one of Birmingham's company towns. In the early 1900s, thousands of people, attracted by the promise of a good job, moved from the rural south to the Birmingham region in droves. While the city offered new economic possibilities, there were social challenges, as rural transplants adjusted to city life. One stabilizing force was the company town, an example of welfare capitalism. Company towns offered living quarters, a commissary, churches, schools, and community activities such as baseball teams and pageants. Sloss Quarters, Docena, and the Thomas community are examples of company towns. The following activities help students gain an appreciation for Birmingham's rural origins through the folk art and culture that were brought to company towns.

Activity 1

Newly transplanted southerners carried their customs to the company towns. Through quilting bees, canning, storytelling, folk music, gardening, and distinctly rural worship styles, the company town represented a hybrid of rural values in an industrial setting. An arts and crafts fair, in which quilts, preserves, mining songs, hymns, and other examples of folk art are displayed, is a hands-on way of encountering the rich culture of the company town.

Activity 2

You can adapt this exercise to a study of Italian, Russian, Polish, Greek, and Irish immigration to Birmingham. Some tight-knit immigrant communities – the Russian Orthodox community in Brookside, for example, still survive. These communities may hold festivals and other cultural celebrations through which students can appreciate the people who built the city.